The Claude Glass

Tom Bullough

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Claude glass, *n. phr.*: a small convex mirror of blackened glass. Used widely by tourists and artists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, its miniature, muted reflection would render a view 'picturesque' – that is, like a picture, and particularly like the idealised landscapes of Claude Lorrain (1600–1682).

CHAPTER ONE

A World of Lines and Circles

The rain fell endlessly in Radnorshire. It came in lines across the hills – blown against the walls of the barns at Werndunvan, oozing through the weatherboards and pouring through the holes in the roof. Across the farm, every sheep path, every ditch and furrow, became a stream, until the hillside was a web of water and thick brown arms reached from the edge of the bottom field into the pond on the edge of the forestry beyond.

Sitting between the big, open doors of the barn, Andrew would look out at the lines and the circles in the puddles. Pressed around him, the dogs nipped him and nuzzled him to play – warm, damp and sharp-smelling – but Andrew stroked them almost without noticing, staring across the yard where the circles shimmered

between the house and himself, between the footprints of the cattle and the ugly brown ruts of the tractor. They were so beautiful that a dizzy feeling rose up in him, like he felt when he was going to sleep, and it was as if there were nothing but these lines and circles, spreading away from him as far as he could see.

That December, the cold weather came early, freezing the damp ground and leaving its teeth along the guttering. The mud was hard in the yard when Andrew's father, Philip, collected him from the barn and the two of them rode on the red Massey Ferguson, down the hill, past the pond, and right into the heart of the forestry plantation. To the north, to the south and west, lines of pines surrounded the farm, and as Andrew watched from the box on the back of the tractor, curled among the dogs, tunnels would open between them and close again just as rapidly – each one shrinking away towards the bottom of the world. He watched them, fascinated, mumbling as Meg licked his face, his head held back against the side, away from the sleet that melted on his cheeks and spilt around the cab of the tractor.

Across the ice-fringed puddles, Philip took the ladder and leant it against one tree after another. He took his muttering chainsaw and climbed to the highest rung, slicing off the top few feet, which fell to the ground as a Christmas tree. Right across the plantation, Andrew could see where his father had performed the same operation in previous years, where clusters of pines were either brown or skeletal, where moss was crawling upwards from the ground to coat their few remaining branches.

It had always amazed Andrew that you could get a small tree, simply by cutting off the top of a big one.

* * *

A few days later, Philip called Andrew again from the barn, but this time, instead of riding on the tractor, they drove down the track on the springy brown seats of the car. They passed among the frost-coloured fields, through gates and over cattle grids that purred beneath the wheels, until, to Andrew's amazement, they came to the lane that flowed down the valley and all the way into the village. Climbing onto his knees to peer outside, for the first time in his life Andrew saw taut new fences, a line of houses with splashes of light and colour in the windows, a field full of stones and, beside it, a building so tall that it came to a point among the dark, snow-heavy clouds. Andrew pressed his face to a space in the icy glass, watching the giant building for as long as he could, but his father turned off the road onto a small slope between two pools of grass. He came to a halt outside a square red house and, without a word, climbed out of the car and vanished away around a corner.

Left on his own, Andrew began to feel scared. He sniffed at the smells of the dogs on the hair-scattered seats and he stared at the place where his father had vanished, longing for him to reappear. But then he heard a noise from behind him – a chorus of voices, like ewes pressing through a gate – and, keeping his head as low as possible,

he peeped over the seat-back to see what on earth it could be.

Just beyond the turning, there was a red and grey building in a big black yard surrounded by a jagged stone wall. And out of the building's front door were streaming, not sheep, but other children like him. They were pawing and pushing, dancing and jumping, breaking into groups and chasing each other across the yard, and together they were making such a racket that Andrew couldn't make out a single individual voice. So intently was he listening to them that he didn't even hear his father until he pulled the door open and climbed heavily back into his seat, tossing a bagful of small brown bottles onto the floor. They were the type that his mother kept on top of the television. She would open them often, tipping white dots onto her palm and staring at them blankly.

"Fucking doctors!" Philip growled. He started the engine, and pebbles went flying up behind them. "Think they know fucking everything!"

They had scarcely turned the next corner before they stopped again, this time next to a white-walled house whose door was framed by blinking, colourful lights. Snow was floating through the cold air, settling like dust on the potholed ground as Andrew followed his father into a hot, dark room full of smoke and the sickly smell of beer, where men in overalls glanced at them in a way that made Andrew want to run back outside. Here, Philip continued to look angry – his forehead ploughed and pressed together – and, clambering up beside him on a stool as tall as himself, Andrew tried to look just the same,

pulling his brows together and hunching his shoulders. In front of them there was a wall of shiny wood that he could just see over and, behind it, a woman with black hair and bright red lips was smiling at him as she pulled on a long white handle. She handed two fat glasses of cider to Philip, one of which he pushed towards Andrew, who soon started to play with it, dipping an old pipe that his father had given him into the foaming brown liquid and spilling it onto the wood, watching as the droplets shrank and twisted into tadpoles, dogs and dragonflies.

"Honestly, Philip. You are an old miser!" the woman laughed, her voice shrill and uncomfortable. "Can't you at least buy this boy some decent clothes?"

"That's enough, Branwen!" barked an old man, who was sitting near the fire. "You keep your bloody nose out of it!"

For a moment, Andrew looked at the two of them, sucking on his empty pipe, wondering why they sounded upset, but then he realised that they were talking about him and he hid himself beneath his father's old cap and buried his arms inside his jacket. Beside him, he heard Philip gulp down his cider, slam down the glass and reach for the other. Around him, the room was so quiet now that he could hear the whispering of the fire, the rumble of a tractor outside on the lane, and he understood that it was his fault that they were all so angry. He sat on the stool in his dog-shredded jumper, the sleeves spilling down over his hands, in the cut-down, filth-smeared trousers that, like most of his clothes, had once belonged to his father, and all that he wanted was to be back in the

barn, to be curled up with the sheepdogs, among the bales and the sweet, sharp smells.

* * *

Across the hill at Penllan, the snow drifted over hedges, changed the shape of the valley, added contours and covered streams where shining contortions of ice had hung between the banks for weeks already. The ponds froze until you could walk right up to the water-hole where the ducks kept plugging around in circles, and would burst into the air if you came too close – flying in their tight formation, landing again cautiously so as not to scoot across the ice on their bottoms and crash into the opposite bank.

The blizzard continued for three days and nights, bursting the pipes in the walls of the bathroom so that water poured through the floor into the kitchen, which duly flooded and turned into an ice-rink in the boot-passage. The thin black branches of the trees vanished into the all-eating whiteness. The sheep abandoned their feeders for the shelter of the hedgerows or the old quarries up on Cold Winter, huddling together in precisely those places that were most likely to be enveloped by a snowdrift. So Adam and Tara locked the sheepdogs in the house and crawled with torches out across the snow, feeling with their hands for the half-frozen animals and driving them tottering into the relative warmth of the big shed.

In the pool of heat in front of the woodburner, Robin and Martin were playing with a multicoloured castle. They

had a blue and white police car that Robin, the older boy, was driving round the hearth rug, out across the floor-boards where cold air rose in plumes from the cracks, and they had an evil army of tractors and soldiers that was waiting for the order to attack.

"Robin!" said Martin. His lower lip was beginning to jut forwards. "Robin, I want to play with the police car now! I want to fight the Sheenah army, too!"

In the shadows of the drawing-room, the two boys might have been different-sized versions of one another. Robin was taller, paler and skinnier, but both had blond fringes that stopped neatly at their eyebrows, and both wore the red and green dressing-gowns that their mother had made for them, tassels swinging from the hoods. At a glance, you might have missed the green intensity of Robin's eyes, or the stubborn specks of colour that were growing on Martin's plump cheeks.

The drawing-room was the province of the grown-ups, a place of shadows and mystery, and it was an honour to be allowed in here at the best of times – let alone to be left with the toy box, a cup of hot milk and a flapjack for each of them. It was the room of locked drawers and cupboards full of photographs, the television, banks of dusty records and other such fascinating things. Across one wall, there was an enormous bookcase that had been built by their father, while other walls were covered in pictures of dancing skeletons, fire-covered monsters and – Robin's favourite – a lady with an extra eye in the middle of her forehead, floating above a range of snow-topped mountains.

"Robin!" Martin repeated, his lip trembling. "Robin, it's my turn now!"

Once his brother had started crying, Robin pushed the police car away across the carpet and jumped up onto an armchair, leaning against the back and staring at the floating lady. The lady had very white skin, with flowers in her hair and a pleasant smile, and she had a comforting quality about her that reminded him vaguely of their mother. The world where she lived was a world full of wonders – people with numerous arms and dragons with the faces of tigers – and Robin smiled back at her as his thoughts wandered off among the mountains and the spiralling clouds.

Beyond the thick stone walls, the wind drove against the open hillside, sucking and gasping in the chimney and rattling the windows in their sockets. It stirred the hems of the heavy green curtains and excited the firelight, but Robin paid it no more attention than he did Martin, driving the police car across the carpet with waning enthusiasm, or the sheepdogs, who had never even been inside the house before, pressing their noses to the crack beneath the door to the boot-passage, whimpering to be allowed back outside.

* * *

Adam worked every day of the year except Christmas. Every morning, long before Robin had even woken up, he was away in some distant part of their eighty-seven acres, his flat cap pulled down over his sandy hair and his

weather-lined forehead, his wide shoulders hunched into a fake Barbour jacket and his pockets full of straw, fencing staples, baler twine and holes. When Adam walked, he strode, the dogs trotting dutifully behind him. When he knocked in a nail, he used a couple of giant blows, and he could pick up a bale with one hand and toss it onto his back as if it were hardly there at all.

Robin could remember only one occasion when Adam had left the farm for more than the few hours that it took him to go to the markets in Abberton or Hereford. Early in October – not long after Robin's seventh birthday – a man called Owl had materialised in a pale blue van with a back like a half-timbered house. He had stayed with them for a whole month. Owl was huge, with an enormous golden beard and hair in a ponytail that came halfway down his back. He was one of those grown-ups who always seemed happy to come outside and build roads up mountains in the sandpit or to sail paper boats on the puddles. The problem was, you could rarely find him awake – he was often in bed until it was almost dark – and sometimes Robin would hear him early in the morning, sitting on the lawn, playing his guitar, smoking and watching the sunrise over the sinuous back of Offa's Bank.

One day, Owl was in the yard when Robin was going to school, his head beneath the bonnet of the van while Martin stood beside him, holding the oilcan and asking to be lifted up so that he could see what was going on.

"I'm just fixing up this old banger," Owl told Robin, tapping his cigarette onto his jeans and rubbing in the ash

with his fingers. "The blasted carburettor's on the blink, and me and your dad are supposed to be going to this car auction off near Gloucester."

He sat down in the driver's seat and turned the key several times, but nothing much happened, except for a few pops and bangs from the exhaust pipe, so the three of them went down to the ruts at the bottom of the yard and built a mud city, complete with stick bridges, waiting for Adam to come along with his toolbox and get the van sputtering into life.

That evening – when Robin and Martin were sitting at the kitchen table, drawing pictures of men in peaked hats shooting one another – there was a bellowing noise on the track and the house seemed to start shaking, light blazing through the curtains in the living-room. The two boys ran around the path by the back door, squeezing between the bars of the gate, and they arrived in the yard to find an enormous blue truck rumbling to itself in front of the barns – its bonnet bulging and its headlights lighting up everything from the muddy puddles to the alarmed-looking bantams on the beams in the hayloft.

"Boys!" called Adam from the window, and the truck made a noise like thunder. "What do you think of that, eh? Get your mother down to have a look!"

The two of them remained where they were, gawping, unable to move in any direction until Tara arrived and led the way past Owl, whose feet were on the dashboard, through the glare of the headlights, the oily reek of the engine, to the door, where Adam was just jumping down to the ground.

"Adam?" asked Tara quietly. "How on earth are we supposed to afford this thing?"

"It's okay," he smiled a little sheepishly. "Honestly, love. The auction was great! They were practically giving it away! And we can run it on red diesel!"

"Adam!" said Robin. "Can you lift me…? Adam!"

Robin had managed to get hold of the seatbelt and had pulled himself upside down, trying to get his feet inside the cab, while Martin tugged insistently on Adam's trousers. Then Owl leant over and picked them both up with his big hairy hands, sitting them beside him on the long black seat, where they played with the horn and each had a turn at pretending to drive. Robin looked over the wheel for his mother, but she had turned, shrugging Adam's hand from her shoulder, and was walking away back up the yard.

Later, when Adam had been round the sheep and had cleared a space for the truck between the haystacks, Owl plugged his electric guitar into the wall next to the piano in the hall. It was his last night with them, so they all lit joss sticks and candles, and even Tara was smoking by the time Adam rolled up his sleeves and hunched himself over the piano keys, thumping his feet against the floorboards and beating out trills and basslines with his calloused fingers.

Tara never took much persuasion to sing. She had a voice which departed from everyday things – as distinct from her normal speech as a bird in the air is distinct from a bird on the ground. She sang songs that would send your thoughts in every direction at once, waving her head so that

her long, white-blonde hair fell loose across her face and she had to tuck it back behind her ears. She smiled with her shiny green eyes, her long thin nose making shadows on her cheeks, and Robin began to feel a dizziness coming over him, until the breath seemed to shake in his chest, he forgot the maracas that he and Martin were supposed to have been playing, and he wouldn't have been able to take his eyes away from her, even if he had wanted to.

* * *

Andrew always got closer to the dogs in the winter. It had been the way ever since he could remember. With the snow chewed up and dirty in the yard, blown in through the door, through the windows and the holes in the barn roof, the five of them would curl up together in the corner, among the hay, as far from the door as they could manage. They would share out the coldness, move from the inside to the outside of the huddle, licking one another drowsily. Andrew would smell their wiry, tough, hungry smell, the damp in their coats, smell it on himself and feel comfortable. He'd feel the bones beneath their fur and remember times when they had been outside in the rain, when the dogs' sodden bodies were so much smaller than they seemed when they were dry.

All of this depended, of course, on whether any of them had managed to insinuate their way into the kitchen without being banished straight back out again. You could never really tell with Philip. Sometimes only the dogs got

banished, sometimes it was all of them, and other times he said nothing at all, and simply sat there staring at the telly. The dogs liked to act fearless – to be the last to stop chasing a car away down the track, the nearest to sinking their teeth into its insolent foreign tyres – but the truth was that Philip had only to growl and they would be wagging pitifully. He had only to whistle for one of them, and the chosen dog would be preening itself for the rest of the day.

The kitchen had warmth, it had dryness and the promise of leftovers, but above all it had a sense of privilege. In the rare times when a neighbour had been over, the dogs would rove around the kitchen, the toilet, the lounge and the bedroom, cocking their legs on anything polluted by the smell, restoring everything to its natural order. Sometimes they would get so immersed that they would forget all about pursuing the intruder off Philip's property, and the intruder would just drive away with nobody to remind him where he was at all.

The most coveted spot on the whole farm was the space in front of the Rayburn – rarely achieved because Andrew's mother, Dora, was almost always standing there, the steam from her saucepans rising around her and condensing on the tattered wallpaper, with its muddy colours and strangled-looking flowers. Now and then, Andrew found it hard to tell where the Rayburn began and his mother ended. The two of them seemed to blur together, black cloth and black metal, the way that fence posts blur with the sides of trees.

The dogs didn't pay much attention to Dora, except to ensure that they weren't stepped on when she made one

of her periodic journeys from the Rayburn to the sink. On one occasion, Vaughn had darted in front of her and had wound up with scalds all down his back. But the dogs learnt to look out for such things – like they learnt not to fall in the cesspit, not to climb onto the table and try to steal food, and not to wander off across the rotten floors and the scattered, broken glass of the abandoned rooms.

Werndunvan was a big old farmhouse, built on a ledge on the side of a hill named Cold Winter. Philip, Dora and Andrew lived in four small rooms on the downstairs floor, where Philip's parents had lived before them, but above them and through the walls there were rooms where the windows were broken, where plaster had fallen in chunks from the walls and the ceilings and the furniture was sinking through the floors. Streams had worked their way down from the cracks and the missing slates in the roof, weaving down the corridors and the staircases, turning the hallways into deltas of lime-coloured dirt.

But there were dry rooms, too, and dry spaces even in the wet rooms, places where you could sit and play among the rubble and the mouldering upholstery. To Andrew these were places of wonder – crowded, as they were, with the wreckage of former inhabitants.

Philip had locked the door in the lounge between their side and the other, even blocked up the cracks at the edges with newspaper, but there was a door at the opposite end of the building which was always open, and Andrew could reach the catch with a stick. He would go through there often, wandering between the rooms, inspecting the pictures on the walls and the old carpets, peering

into boxes or simply curled up in a corner, wrapped in a dust-heavy blanket, smelling the smells beneath the farm's competing reeks: the sharpness of the mice and the bats in the roof, the sweetness of the alien plants in the jungle of a garden, the weight of the dampness in the stone and the wood, the essence of decay.